CHINESE POLITICS AND THE SINO-SOVIET-US TRIANGLE

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The prospects for war, conciliation, or continued tension between China and the USSR have a critical impact on the leverage available to the US in its dealings with both Communist powers. The purpose of the study on which this overview is based is to explore in detail one of the most complex problems which shape these prospects -- the relationship between Chinese internal politics and China's policy toward both the USSR and the US. By focusing on the protracted and ultimately violent realignment of domestic political power that occurred in China during the years when the current contours of the Sino-Soviet-US triangle began to emerge (1966-1971), this study attempts to illuminate the basic forces within the political system which are likely to continue to shape the course of Chinese foreign policy in a post-Mao era. The study reconstructs two events which marked major turning points in the political struggle: the Sino-Soviet border

NOTE: This brief overview is based on a forthcoming OPR Research Study (OPR-404, August 1975,) which presents a number of new interpretations regarding the patterns of interaction between Chinese politics and foreign policy. The issuing office is aware that the complex and controversial issues discussed lend themselves to alternate interpretations. Neither the present essay nor the forthcoming Research Study represents an official CIA position.

crisis of 1969, and the internal upheaval that led to the fall of Defense Minister Lin Piao and most of China's top central military leaders in September 1971. A final section discusses the implications for US policy.

The Approach to the Problem

The Chinese political system, far from representing a totalitarian monolith, has over the last several years been torn by deep political cleavages which are both the cause and the consequence of conflict at the top over the major policy issues facing the country. Indeed, while all Chinese leaders have been acutely conscious of the need to enhance their nation's status and power in world affairs, there has been serious and protracted dissension over the optimum cluster of domestic, economic, defense, and foreign policies to pursue in order to do so. These clusters, or policy alternatives, are supported by Chinese leaders representing policy coalitions which are in part bureaucratically based; the contention for power and influence among these coalitions has shaped and is likely to continue to shape the course of Chinese politics and foreign policy.

Three policy clusters, believed to approximate the complex reality of Chinese politics, have been identified for analytical purposes: (1) The radical alternative is highly ideological and sees revolutionary spirit and self-reliance as the vehicles

for Chinese advancement; it inclines towards isolationism and is vehemently anti-Soviet and anti-US. (2) The moderate alternative is relatively pragmatic and outward looking; it favors improved relations with the US, Japan, and the West generally both as a a counterweight to Soviet power and as a means of speeding China's economic development. (3) The military alternative is essentially non-ideological; its general goal is to enhance China's power and status by increasing military capabilities, especially in the field of advanced weapons technology. It opposes the opening to the US, and as an alternative proposes a short-term decrease in tension with Moscow combined with long term emphasis on developing a credible nuclear deterrent.

The chart at Annex summarizes the main points of the status and power alternatives outlined above, and provides an overview of the periods within recent Chinese history when each cluster has been partially dominant, dominant, or in contention for dominance.

This framework and the subsequent analysis reflect what has come to be called the "bureaucratic politics" approach to foreign policy analysis. It views the Chinese government not as a unitary actor which makes foreign policy decisions designed solely to optimize Chinese national interests, but rather as a number of competing "players"; foreign policy is the political outcome of the interplay and infighting among these players, each of which tends to interpret the national interest in terms

of its own factional interests.

Before identifying the key players in the political struggle, it is important to note that each policy cluster represents a general tendency, or, as the nomenclature implies, a cluster of tendencies rather than clearly defined and inflexible programs of action. No individual Chinese leader adheres without deviation to all the tenets of any specific cluster, and individuals who generally support one tendency may over time come to alter their views and swing toward another alternative. With this caveat in mind, we can say that the principal leader of the moderate coalition was Premier Chou En-lai, who drew support primarily from the civilian bureaucracies; that the radicals were represented by Chiang Ching and Yao Wen-yuan, who, as members of the radical wing of the Party, had risen to prominence during the Cultural Revolution; and that the military coalition was headed by Defense Minister Lin Piao, who's primary base of support was in the defense establishment.

During the course of contention for power and influence among these leaders, Chairman Mao Tse-tung of course played the central -- and usually the dominant -- role. While Mao probably made many decisions in relative isolation, the coalition leaders regularly sought to influence the Chairman to gain his powerful support for their initiatives. He, in turn, attempted to maintain his overall position of primacy in part by carefully assessing the relative strength of the contending coalitions and

by playing off each group against the others. Nonetheless, in this process, he appears at times to have been forced -- at the very least persuaded by concern about the constellation of forces raised against him -- to reverse specific policies or positions he had previously taken.

The degree of Mao's dominance has long been a contentious issue among analysts of Chinese affairs. But Mao is now old and ill; evidence is accumulating that he is already decreasing his active involvement in Chinese politics. And since his gradual eclipse is almost certain to usher in a new period of jockeying for power, a new look at forces shaping Chinese politics other than Mao himself seems in order. Thus, while the overall approach taken here is the retrospective analysis of two central events, the focus is on the future and the patterns and tendencies within Chinese politics which are likely to continue in a post-Mao, post-Chou era.

Turning Point: The 1969 Crisis in Sino-Soviet Relations

On 2 March 1969 an unusual incident occurred on the frozen Ussuri river near the desolate island which the Chinese call Chen-pao and the Soviets call Damansky. On numerous occasions since the early 1960's, there had been periodic non-shooting skirmishes in this and other areas along the disputed Sino-Soviet border. On 2 March 1969, for the first time, Chinese soldiers opened fire on a Soviet patrol, killing 7 soldiers

and wounding 23. On 15 March, the Soviets retaliated with a full scale military engagement in the same area during which hundreds of troops on both sides were killed and injured. Following these conventional military exchanges, Soviet spokesmen hinted in a number of forums that a nuclear attack on China might become necessary. By August 1969, the situation had deteriorated so badly that some Western observers were convinced that war was inevitable in the near term. In short, the events of 1969 marked the most serious crisis in the entire history of Sino-Soviet relations.

The 1969 crisis has always been difficult to explain. On the face of it, the Chinese attack at Chen-pao seemed irrational. Why should Peking risk even local hostilities with the Soviets to assert an historical claim to a useless island? And if Peking's goal was to demonstrate that China could not be pushed around, then why was an area chosen where Soviet troops were heavily concentrated and, as the 15 March clash showed, quite capable of humiliating the Chinese in pitched local battles? Most critically, why would China's leaders want to engage themselves in a foreign policy crisis when they were in fact preparing for a major domestic political event: the Ninth Party Congress which opened in early April?

Perhaps no completely satisfying explanation of the origins of the crisis will ever emerge, but a good case can be made that

the initial Chinese attack on the Soviets was the outcome of intense political infighting within China, both over who would set Chinese policy and whether Peking should execute a major departure in its foreign policy by improving relations with the US.

For some years prior to the crisis, the radical coalition had been dominant in China, and foreign policy had been characterized by a xenophobia which had left Peking isolated internationally. During 1968, however, a number of events, including the opening of the Paris peace talks on Vietnam and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, gave the leaders of the moderate coalition the chance to argue for a shift in Chinese policy toward an opening to the US. In the fall of 1968, basic decisions were made to move in this direction by Mao and Chou, but these were apparently reversed in February 1969 because of the intense opposition of both the military and radical coalitions. The radicals opposed the opening for ideological reasons; Lin and the military opposed it in part because it would have been a triumph for Lin's rival, Chou-En-lai, and in part because they wanted to leave the door open for improved relations with Moscow.

That Mao and Chou had been reversed on an initiative in which they had invested considerable prestige is only one of a number of indications that they may have been in serious political

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trouble at this time. According to [redacted]

25X1X [redacted] the many delays in convening the Ninth Party Congress were a direct result of Mao's calculation that he could not count on the support of the military at the meeting. Moreover, [redacted] 25X1X4 depicted the strength Lin Piao and his supporters ultimately achieved in the most vivid terms, and Lin was very likely making major strides toward this position of strength in early 1969. Mao himself, for example, has recently stated that "Lin Piao almost succeeded in taking over the whole party," and Vice Premier Teng Hsiao-ping has gone so far as to say that "the Lin Piao anti-party clique was able to expand its influence and gradually gain control of the Party." If all this is coupled with the advances made by Lin at the Party Congress at the expense of moderates and radicals, then one can make a case that both Mao and Chou were in a precarious political position in early 1969.

Under these circumstances, a clash with the Soviets would serve the interests of Mao and Chou in a number of areas. Most importantly, it would be a strong reassertion of Mao's personal authority following the February setback on US policy and the general trend toward greater power for Lin and the military. Secondly, it would make it far more difficult for the military

coalition to sustain a case that Sino-Soviet relations should be improved. Thirdly, the resultant increase in Sino-Soviet tension would provide dramatic justification for an opening to the US. In short, it would serve both the foreign policy and domestic political purposes of these key Chinese decisionmakers.

This line of explanation, however, raises some very difficult questions: if Lin and his supporters on the Politburo had been strong enough to reverse Mao and Chou on the question of the first steps toward the opening to the US, why would they not have had enough clout to prevent an action which was not in the best interests of the policy line they advocated? Moreover, since Lin was in charge of the defense bureaucracy, how could a decision requiring a military action be taken without his approval?

While it is possible that Mao and Chou confronted Lin directly on this decision and simply ordered him to take steps to implement it, it seems more likely, given the internal political situation, that they pursued their goals by circumventing the normal chain of command and directly ordered Chen Hsi-lien, commander of the Shenyang Military Region, to attack the Soviets. Because Chen's own personal ambitions were well served by an increase in tension on the Sino-Soviet border, it is likely that he would have obeyed an order from Mao even at the risk of involving himself directly in the internal power struggle

in Peking. Moreover, many other aspects of the events surrounding the 2 March incident support the view that the attack was not carefully planned by China's central defense establishment, but, instead, was arranged on short notice and executed without the knowledge of higher military authorities.

This interpretation of the 2 March clash, in short, has Mao and Chou acting hastily for highly political reasons rather than making a rational and detached determination of what China's national interests required. That they were prepared to risk the death of hundreds of Chinese soldiers, and even war with the Soviet Union, is thus a measure not only of how high they calculated the stakes in the internal power struggle, but also of how badly they wanted to discredit those within China who opposed the opening to the US. Certainly the message that Mao could count on the loyalty of China's second most powerful military regional commander would not be lost on Lin in the continuing power struggle.

While there were ups and downs in Chinese propaganda throughout the remainder of 1969, tension in Sino-Soviet relations remained high. Nationwide demonstrations began on the day after the clash, and by 7 March some 260 million Chinese had participated in mass rallies denouncing Soviet revisionism and vowing vigilance along the border. The message to the domestic rivals of Mao and Chou was unmistakable: anti-Soviet

sentiment was strong among the Chinese people and anyone favoring lessened tension with Moscow was treading on very unpopular ground. Moreover, the Chinese continued aggressive border patrolling until August when the Soviets responded by dropping veiled hints about a possible nuclear strike. The crisis atmosphere reinforced the position of the Chinese moderates who were disposed to be receptive to the overtures for improved Sino-US relations which were coming out of Washington.

In what was almost certainly a compromise between the moderates and their opponents, the Chinese agreed in October to open negotiations on the border dispute with Moscow, and then in January 1970 announced they would be willing to reschedule the aborted February 1969 Warsaw talks with the US. While it quickly became apparent that they were not taking the Sino-Soviet border talks seriously, they tried to keep up momentum in relations with the US by meeting in Warsaw in February 1970 and then scheduling another session of the bilateral talks for May 1970. Thus, the basic foreign policy goal of justifying steps toward an opening to the US was well served by the 2 March crisis; though, as discussed below, Lin's drive toward expanding his power and influence in party affairs was not derailed but only slowed. In this context, the Sino-Soviet clash of March 1969 was a prelude to the decisive confrontation between the moderates and

the military which came to a crisis two years later -- the fall of Lin Piao.

Watershed: The Fall of Lin Piao

By almost all surface criteria, Lin Piao had won a stunning victory at the Ninth Party Congress, primarily at the expense of Chou En-lai, his principal rival. Chou's power base was in the governmental bureaucracies, and of the six men drawn from this sector on the Politburo in 1968, all but two, Chou and Li Hsien-nien, lost their positions at the Congress. Eleven military men were added to the Politburo, a majority of whom were apparently Lin supporters. Lin's close ally Chen Po-ta was named to the crucial Standing Committee of the Politburo, and more importantly, the Congress formally adopted a new constitution designating Lin by name as Mao's successor. Lin, it appeared, was well on his way to supreme power within China. And yet, in just over two years after the Ninth Party Congress, Lin had fallen from power following an intense and ultimately violent struggle within the Chinese leadership.

Lin's fall was far more than the purging of a single individual. It was preceded by an elaborate conspiracy against Mao that involved a large number of individuals and was followed by a purge of virtually all of China's ranking central military leaders. In the context of the framework presented in this study, the Lin Piao affair represented the crisis stage of the

struggle for power between the moderate coalition and the military that had been under way since the winding down of the Cultural Revolution in 1968. In relative terms, the radical coalition played only a marginal role.

Most previous explanations of the Lin Piao crisis have played down the role of foreign policy issues. By contrast, this study presents the view that these issues, and more specifically what they implied in terms of resource allocation and the resultant balance of power between the moderate and military coalitions, are central to explaining the course of events that preceded Lin's abortive 1971 coup. In brief, Lin appears to have consistently opposed any steps toward rapprochement with the US throughout 1969 and 1970. He apparently seized on the US invasion of Cambodia in the spring of 1970 to persuade Mao both to cancel the scheduled Sino-US talks in Warsaw and to make a series of reconciliatory gestures toward Moscow. This shift toward Lin's approach to foreign policy came to an abrupt end following the Second Plenum of the Ninth Party Congress in August 1970 when the balance of internal political forces began to tilt against Lin. Soon thereafter, there was a major change in China's propaganda line. New and authoritative anti-Soviet pronouncements were made and an ideological justification for improved relations with the US was endorsed publicly by high Foreign Ministry officials. By December 1970 Mao felt strong

enough to extend the historic invitation to President Nixon.

Lin's continued opposition to the opening to the US is well documented, but what is more difficult to explain is why he felt compelled to risk a confrontation with Mao on this issue. The answer apparently lies in the fact that concomitant with the critical debates over foreign policy issues in 1971 there was an intense struggle over the allocation of scarce resources, with Lin and his supporters favoring the continuation of the high levels of military expenditures they had obtained for 1968-1971. If Chou succeeded in enhancing China's sense of security by improved relations with Washington, they reasoned, a key element in their rationale for high military expenditures would be undercut.

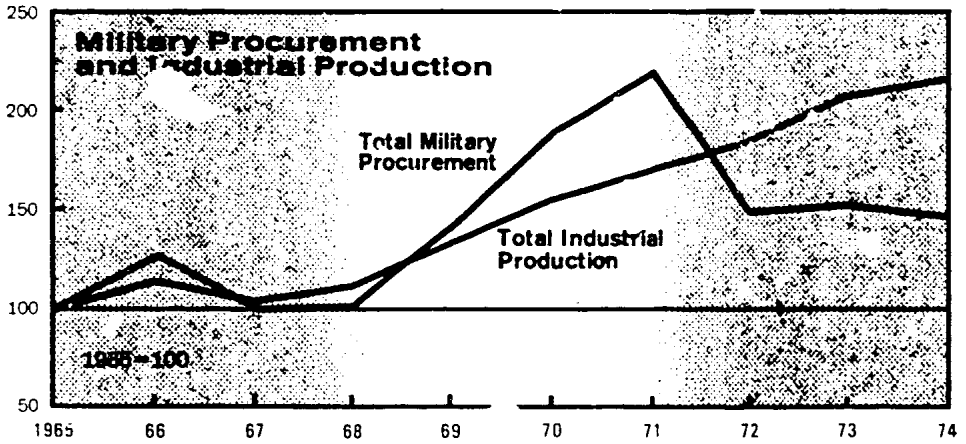
Recent intelligence studies on military expenditures for procurement of new equipment bear out this interpretation.* Indeed, the rise and fall in the influence of the military coalition is starkly reflected in the statistics presented in these studies. During the period when Lin and the military were in an ascendant position, roughly from 1968 until the end of 1971, military spending on procurement in all fields increased dramatically, with a growing proportion going to aircraft and missiles combined. Just as significant, however,

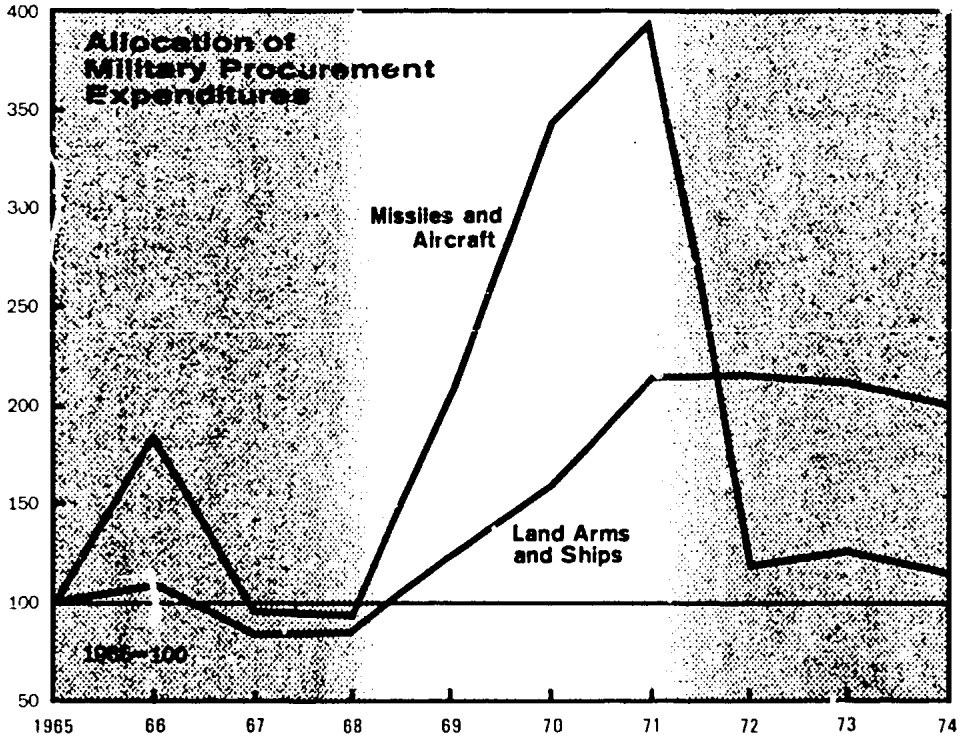
* CIA, "Trends in Military Equipment Procurement in China, 1964-1973, in US Cost Terms," Intelligence Report, August 1974, SECRET.

are the sharp cutbacks in this same area that followed Lin's fall from power in 1971. While the amounts expended for the procurement of land arms have continued to remain at the high levels attained by 1971, and while purchases for naval forces have declined only slightly, expenditures on new aircraft and missiles have fallen dramatically. In overall terms, the reallocation of resources is shown by the fact that military procurement has decreased in relation to total industrial production (see accompanying chart "Resource Allocation and Military Procurement in China, 1965-1974").

This interpretation of Lin's fall from power does not argue that foreign policy issues were more important than the general issue of civilian versus military rule. In effect, foreign policy issues were so intimately linked to a cluster of other issues that they formed an integral part of the overall struggle between the moderate coalition and the military coalition. A debate over resource allocation and foreign policy was the immediate catalyst because it brought to a head the entire question of the continued predominance of the military in Chinese politics and society. Mao and Chou were undoubtedly engaged in a broadly-based campaign to prevent Lin and the military from expanding their power still further, and to do so they not only confronted this issue specifically, but also used the thrust of their foreign policy program to focus the debate on

Resource Allocation and Military Procurement in China, 1965-74





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the concrete issue of resource allocation.

Just as in 1969 when they had used a foreign policy crisis to further their domestic goals, so in 1971 they used arguments drawn from the implications of their diplomatic program for the same purpose. Moreover, in the unsettled situation that followed Lin's abortive coup, Mao and Chou systematically exaggerated the threat of war with the Soviet Union in order to create a crisis atmosphere conducive to party unity during the purge they conducted of pro-Lin military figures.

All of this points to a general view that there is not as wide a division in China as in the US between the worlds of the foreign and domestic policymaker; indeed, it is reasonable to conclude that the small number of men at the apex of China's political structure do not make any significant distinctions between the spheres of domestic, foreign, and national security policy. Indeed, Foreign Minister Chiao Kuan-hua has stated explicitly that Chinese "foreign policies are inseparable from domestic policies," and that no formal decisionmaking structure for foreign policy similar to the National Security Council exists in China.

Implications for the US

A. The "Collusion" Theme as a Key Indicator

Since they began the transformation of China's domestic and foreign policies in 1968, backers of the moderate alternative have

had to fight a two-front domestic war. On the one hand, they have been opposed by the radicals who were hostile to the moderate policy cluster for ideological reasons. On the other, they have been opposed by the military coalition not only because it was seeking supreme power in China, but also on grounds of "national security."

While the leverage of the radical coalition on policy decisions has now been considerably reduced, this apparently is not the case for the military coalition. In the first place, many military leaders have their own independent power bases; secondly, they almost certainly have sympathizers within the moderate coalition in general and the foreign policy establishment in particular; and thirdly, they have a strong argument which is cast in terms of China's vital national security interests. Their argument probably would go something like this:

> A basic premise of the moderates' national security program is that "contention" will always win out over "collusion" in Soviet-US relations, and that China can therefore count on a powerful US as a counterbalance to the USSR in world affairs. This premise, however, is extremely dangerous because it does not take into consideration two very real possibilities: 1) the first is that the US, because of domestic political and economic difficulties as well as international setbacks, may fall seriously behind Moscow in terms of the strategic balance of power and therefore be unable to fill the role of a counterbalance to Soviet power; 2) perhaps in part because of the above, the US may well find it convenient or even necessary to place such a great emphasis on improved relations with the Soviets, especially in the critical area of strategic arms limitation, that it will be willing to sacrifice its

relations with China to attain this goal. Thus, China is endangering its national security by placing too large a share of its national resources in the service of economic development rather than military expenditures, and the diplomatic rationale for following this course may well be incorrect because it fails to take into consideration the prospect that Soviet-US competition in world affairs could well be replaced by a degree of cooperation that would seriously endanger China's national security.

Seen in this perspective, events which signal significant or rapid progress in Soviet-US relations, especially in the area of strategic arms limitation, are likely to lead to renewed debate within China over the wisdom of its present stance, and could lead to an increase of the relative power of the military coalition which in turn might result in a shift in the conduct of China's policies toward the US and the USSR.

B. The Level of Tension

Overall, tension in Sino-Soviet relations has declined since 1969, in large measure because the moderate policy coalition has extended its control, the internal situation has become somewhat more stable, and China has received greater recognition from the international community. Nevertheless, tension could easily again flare up if during the protracted and delicate succession process already under way, a group within China were to become predominant which judges that its interests would be served by a provocation such as the 1969 border clash. Whether or not such a situation evolves depends in part on events out-

side China in general and on the actions of the USSR and the US in particular.

US moves which would enhance China's status, such as establishing full diplomatic relations, would probably strengthen the moderates' hold on power and their commitment to the policy of expanding ties with non-Communist countries. Paradoxically, such developments would probably also serve to lessen the imperatives pressing elements in the Chinese leadership toward periodic crises with the USSR. Not only would the leadership have a decreased need to play up the Soviet threat to deflect attack from domestic critics, but -- with more self-confidence regarding China's status in the international hierarchy -- these leaders would probably be more willing to enter into serious negotiations with the Soviets over the border issue. If Moscow were careful to take Chinese sensitivities into consideration by making a substantial conciliatory gesture (such as a sizeable drawdown of its forces in the border area), some form of mutually acceptable border arrangement could conceivably be worked out.

The primary impact of a border arrangement would be to decrease substantially the chances of some future border incident escalating into a nuclear war in Asia. Nevertheless, China's interests are at odds with the USSR's throughout Asia, and a border agreement would not end the struggle for influence and power there and in the rest of the world.

Moreover, even if there were some improvement in Sino-Soviet relations, the US would still have leverage for maintaining competition between the two powers. The moderates, having been strengthened by normalization of relations with the US, would probably allow the logic of their thesis on enhancing China's status to carry them even further in their pragmatic search for power and prestige through conventional diplomacy and economic development. Indeed, given the right circumstances, a moderate Chinese government might in the future be amenable to expanding substantially its cultural, economic, and perhaps even military ties with non-Communist countries in general and the US in particular. Should the Sino-US relationship advance along these lines, there is little doubt that there would be serious Soviet concern, and that this would express itself in increased Sino-Soviet tension.

At the same time, expanded ties with the US would directly or indirectly provide greater resources for meeting the military coalition's goal of strengthening China's military capabilities. And an amelioration of internal antagonisms on this issue would be likely to increase support for the moderates among at least some elements of the military, a development which in turn would contribute to the strength and stability of a Chinese leadership coalition with vested interests in maintaining good relations with the US.

ANNEX